

WASHINGTON – The Senate on Thursday overwhelmingly approved a 21st Century GI Bill that would provide military veterans with expanded educational benefits ranging from college tuition to living stipends.

This historic measure – whose chief sponsor in the House is U.S. Rep. Harry E. Mitchell – cleared the Senate by a veto-proof 75-22 margin as an amendment to the FY 2008 Supplemental Appropriations Bill for war funding.

“As we head into the Memorial Day weekend, this is really the best news that we could be delivering to our military personnel and veterans,” Mitchell said. “We have the opportunity and obligation as a nation to strengthen our commitment to those who have served in combat. These education benefits will not only help military recruitment, but will strengthen our economy at a time when it needs it the most.”

The measure previously passed the House on May 15, 2008 by a bipartisan vote of 256 to 166.

The bill now heads to a House-Senate Conference Committee to work out differences in the bill in a conference committee.

The House would have to provide at least 291 votes to counteract a threatened White House veto, but the bill currently has 300 cosponsors. Mitchell said he is confident that House and Senate conferees would reach an agreement soon and it would earn strong support when it returns to the House for final approval.

The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act extends educational benefits to all members of the military who have served on active duty since September 11, 2001, including activated reservists and National Guard.

Under the legislation,

- Service members returning from Iraq or Afghanistan would receive up to four academic years of education benefits, including stipends for housing and books.
- Veterans would have up to 15 years after they leave active duty to use their education benefits.
- Veterans would have the ability to use their benefits for program fees, tuition, books and housing.
- Veterans would be able to use the Yellow Ribbon G.I. Education Enhancement Program, in which the federal government will match, dollar for dollar, any voluntary additional contributions to veterans from institutions whose tuition is more expensive than the maximum educational assistance provided under the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill.

Mitchell introduced the legislation with U.S. Reps. Bobby Scott (D-Va.), Ginny Brown-Waite (R-Fla.), and Peter King (R-N.Y.).